Balancing interests and perceptions

Foreign policy in Central Asia

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Since gaining independence in 1991, the states of Central Asia (defined as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have had to create and manage foreign policy strategies that (1) effectively address their national interests and (2) factor in the realities of the region itself. The landlocked states are surrounded by nuclear (or nuclear-aspirant) powers and conflict zones, and have themselves been the “objects of interest” by outside powers, specifically Russia; China; and, to a lesser extent, the United States and the European Union (EU) countries. The Central Asian countries have maneuvered through these tricky waters of foreign and security policy, and have forged their own foreign policy identities and strategies, respectively. For example, Kazakhstan’s “multi-vector security policy” gives it a balancing role in the region and offers access to a wider set of relations. On the other hand, Turkmenistan’s “positive neutrality” and Uzbekistan’s autarkic economic and security approaches set conditions for these states to selectively engage and maintain ties with problematic neighbors. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan exemplify the limitations of being small powers surrounded by larger states, especially when it comes to developing coherent foreign policy agendas. Over time, each of the five states has tried to assert its own national interests and has experienced mixed results.

This chapter will compare and contrast how the states of Central Asia have established their own foreign policies and the inherent logic of these choices. While not always necessary, the leaders of the region have often justified their approaches to their domestic audiences and the international community through openly published foreign policy strategies, press interviews, and speeches at international conferences. As important as the policies themselves is how they are perceived both within the region and by outside powers. In many ways, framing foreign policy agendas is key to the success of the regimes themselves.

It is common to overlook the Central Asian states in discussions of Asian politics. This is partly because these five countries are often viewed as Soviet legacies, part of “Eurasia,” or somehow in another orbit of nations. Russia remains committed to the view that these states are part of its “near abroad” or special security region, in which Russia ought to have a dominant presence (Bugajski 2010; Mileski 2015). In contrast, American and European engagement with these states has been, and remains, premised on the belief that better connecting them to Western security organizations will further enhance their foreign and
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security futures, as will adopting normative values, such as individual human rights, democratic institutions, and free market economies (Hansen 2005; Nichol 2014). Given the historic role of Islam in the region, others view Central Asia as part of that world, with greater attention to north-south connections. It has mainly been in the past decade that the Asian character of Central Asia has been articulated on a more regular basis, not surprisingly by experts who see these states from a continental perspective (Dadabaev 2014). In terms of normative values and political frameworks, the Central Asian governments themselves are more seriously evaluating Asian security structures and rhetoric, prompting further analysis of how Central Asian foreign policy developments can be assessed through this particular lens.

Ultimately, Central Asia is a true “crossroads.” Each country in the region has had to address these conflicting paradigms within policy environments fraught with limits and challenges. This chapter will first examine the development and evolution of the foreign policy strategies of the five states of Central Asia. Then it will turn to how outside powers have attempted to shape these policies. Finally, it will look at future trends and potential challenges to these foreign policies, with particular attention given to how an increasing attention to Asian security architectures might provide solutions to some outstanding issues. Overall, the countries’ behavior increasingly resembles that of other small and medium states that are compelled to make choices in terms of interests and needs while acknowledging the constraints of a myriad of factors, such as geography, capabilities, budget, and even personnel, to name a few. Given the range of influences, it is no surprise that defining how each Central Asian state wants to be perceived as an active shaper of its own foreign policy is equally important.

A perception problem: deflecting the great game image

Since the 1990s, there has been a steady stream of writing emphasizing the “great game” nature of foreign and security policy in the Central Asian region. This has been done for two main reasons. First, the historic understanding of the region is limited, so it’s convenient to rely on romantic imagery and conclude that what took place in the 19th century between the Russian and British empires will simply be repeated by contemporary states in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Hopkirk 1992; Cooley 2012). Second, using this narrative allows a given outside country the ability to justify its own policy toward the region or, more importantly, that of other states. It also provides credible excuses for Central Asian states to explain their own foreign policy engagements, being able to better explain obvious limitations and periodic failures. The reality on the ground has been much less dramatic. Since 1991, the states crafted their own policies based more on national interests, resources, and capabilities, often focusing on a few key issues that were of immediate and existential importance.

From the start, the priorities were limited to simply being recognized as independent states and functioning as such. Unlike other Union Republics in the Soviet Union, the five states in Central Asia were not known for their independence movements, which sought to leave the country. While there was an increasing interest in particular national identities and being able to freely express them, even the most ardent nationalists in Central Asia assumed that this could be done within the framework of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Plokhii 2014). When that entity collapsed in December 1991, the initial challenge facing all five countries was similar to that of the other “successor states”: the bureaucratic reality of opening embassies, receiving foreign embassies, and developing cadres of foreign policy experts. Individuals who had served in the Soviet foreign ministry were enticed to stay, but many who had no previous foreign policy experience found
themselves “learning on the job” during that first decade. It was up to the strong leaders – First Secretaries-turned-Presidents – to articulate clear foreign policy objectives for the new states.

During this time, there was a natural dependency on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as well as on maintaining particularly close ties with the newly formed Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was the most experienced foreign policy organ among the successor states. As other countries opened their embassies in the Central Asian capitals, these Russian officials became helpful tutors in the world of international diplomacy. The language of communication remained Russian, and real interests focused on the immediate requirements brought on by the dismantling of the Soviet Union. For most foreign powers, their newfound experts and even ambassadors to the region tended to be from their Soviet embassies or individuals who had Russian-language capabilities. In short, Central Asia was perceived to be an element of the “Former Soviet Union.” Linkages remained tied to this old identity.

For the countries in the region, foreign affairs mattered less than the stabilization of domestic politics and regime authority. However, this lack of autonomous foreign policies had consequences. For example, when Russia floated the ruble in January 1992, the resultant hyperinflation and economic collapse of that country was experienced in all five Central Asian countries. This action was not coordinated with the Central Asian states, and each had to react as best they could. Because Russia was the primary economic trading and investment partner of each Central Asian country, negative developments in Russia were obviously felt in the region. Oddly, as Uzbekistan pursued a more autarkic approach to economic development, it seemed to fare better than the others (World Bank 2016). The same lack of coordination occurred with policies such as transportation and customs guidelines, visa regimes, and citizenship requirements (especially on the question of whether one could have dual citizenship). In terms of military and security cooperation, the Central Asian states were signatories to the Collective Security Treaty, which was formalized at a conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in May 1992. The exception in this instance was Turkmenistan, which had already started to develop a more neutral stance in the region, culminating in the declared policy of Positive Neutrality several years later. Overall, the majority of meetings and efforts that focused on foreign policy matters remained within the CIS, the primary theater of engagement for the Central Asian countries.

It should also be noted that “foreign policy” also meant how to manage aid from abroad, whether from the United States, European countries, or fellow CIS nations. Kyrgyzstan opened its doors to Western donors, hoping to capitalize on the largesse of various international aid organizations. In a more desperate situation, Tajikistan’s initial foreign policy priority quickly devolved into a situation in which it simply wanted assistance from outside powers to maintain a besieged regime and some modicum of engagement as the civil war raged from 1992 to 1997. In this instance, outside powers did play the key role of mediator. Russia, Iran, and the Western-based Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), for example, were all part of the accord process that drew this conflict to a negotiated conclusion in 1997 (Kamoludin and Barnes 2001).

The image of Central Asia to the world beyond the CIS began to change when outside energy firms actively bid on Kazakh, Uzbek, and Turkmen oil and gas fields. In conjunction with Azerbaijan, these new markets of the Caspian Sea region were of great international interest as energy prices increased throughout the decade. So-called “deals of the century” marked the final years of the 20th century as these very firms not only established themselves in the region but set the terms for foreign governments to consider energy security a priority
in Central Asian engagement, especially with over 50 billion barrels of oil and 300 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves in the region (Levine 2007; BTI 2016). Its elevated importance came at a cost in terms of perception: Once again, the “great game” image was applied to the region, this time in the context of foreign powers and companies vying for the right to control Central Asian energy resources. Kazakhstan was the only state to truly make oil part of its foreign policy, over time setting more nation-friendly terms on future exploration and development contracts. Turkmenistan’s hesitancy to conclude deals on exploiting gas fields meant that initial efforts to do so often failed to materialize.

The new millennium brought different challenges to Central Asia. The energy market experienced a significant downturn during the period of 1998–2000, affecting not just the export potential of the Central Asian states but also the ability of outside investors to sustain their presence. Second, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States prompted the government of President George W. Bush to go after Al-Qaeda and the “host entity” in Afghanistan, the Taliban, in the following month. Because access to Afghanistan required cooperation from the Central Asian states, one by one, they signed various “status of forces agreements” with the United States and later with its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. Supporting Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the concurrent peace support operation “ISAF” (International Stabilization in Afghanistan Force), bases opened up in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and flyover and emergency landing rights were granted in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Kangas 2008). Critics considered these agreements to be part of a “militarization” or “securitization” of Central Asia by outside countries – a concern that still plagues the region today. More to the point, the engagement that followed demonstrated the security importance of Central Asia in addition to its aforementioned energy importance. The “great game” image surfaced yet again in this context, with some noting that the West was aggressively creating permanent military bases in Central Asia. Even after the last bases were closed in 2014 (Manas Transit Center) and 2015 (Termez), this perception remains.

In reality, the security needs of the ISAF and the US Department of Defense replicated the needs of other sectors: Central Asia was seen as important due to its location, transit capacity, and relationship to other regional actors. Interest in Central Asia developed over time but often for reasons that were related to either resource needs or security concerns in the broader South and Central Asian region. Consequently, each of the countries had to adjust their own foreign and security policies to reflect these episodic outside interests but, more importantly, to protect their own priorities in this ever-changing world. While much was noted of the “great game” quality of the region, it was more the case that countries viewed Central Asia instrumentally, not for itself. As a result, the states had to create foreign policy priorities that would either take advantage of these outside interests or repel any perceived effort by the same countries to control them. That tension remains integral within the Central Asian states today.

**Evolution of national foreign policy strategies**

Each of the five Central Asian countries developed distinct foreign policy strategies based on their own perceptions of national security priorities. As the initial years of simply gaining legitimacy passed, one began to see a clearer description of what each state considered to be of utmost concern. Important in this discussion is the understanding that the leaderships of each country believe that they have agency and the ability to frame and promote a foreign policy of their choosing. As we will see, this belief in agency is often unrealized. At the same
time, the continued reality of working with limited budgets, capacity, and the “challenges of the neighborhood” means that the development of coherent and effective foreign policies remains a difficult undertaking, as is evident in the distinct character of each country’s efforts.

Kazakhstan

From the start, President Nursultan Nazarbayev categorized Kazakhstan’s foreign policy as a “multi-vectored” one. The country was not going to be beholden to any specific power but rather would balance its interests among several. Beyond the normal narratives one heard from Almaty, and then Astana, what did this mean? Without question, the notion of “continued engagement” remains paramount, that is, in terms of addressing trade relations, energy security, and also combating transnational threats, such as terrorism, extremism, and increasingly cyberattacks.

Kazakhstan continues to diversify economic and trade relations with outside powers, so it will not be beholden to any single country. Trade statistics still show that Russia is the major partner, but China and other Asian states are fast becoming key competitors for Kazakhstan’s attention. In published documents, like Kazakhstan 2030 and Strategy Kazakhstan 2050, ambitious goals are set to make the country a top-20 economy that is less dependent upon energy export revenues. Green energy is the centerpiece of the 2017 Astana Exposition, highlighting this point (Nazarbayev 2012).

Two significant challenges confront Kazakhstan today. The first is its complicated relationship with Russia. While President Nazarbayev is on good terms with President Vladimir Putin, periodically, one sees rhetorical rifts open between the countries. Political actors in Russia, including President Putin, have questioned the national integrity of Kazakhstan, suggesting that President Nazarbayev “created” it. Moreover, Moscow has formally declared that the safety of the Russian community within Kazakhstan is “protected” by Russia itself, as noted in its National Security Strategy. The heavily Russian-populated northern provinces are also called into question, making some Kazakhstani analysts worried about Russia’s intentions overall.

The second complication is simply that intra-Central Asian relations aren’t the strongest, belying any thought of true regional cooperation. Ties with Kyrgyzstan are frayed because of the one-sided trade and energy agreements as well as the Kyrgyz desire to develop hydroelectric dams along rivers that are of immense importance to Kazakhstan. Ties with Uzbekistan have also been complicated, largely because of the personal dynamics of the first presidents but also due to a perceived rivalry as to who is the “leader of Central Asia” (Laumulin and Tolipov 2010).

Perhaps in a bid to underscore its leading role in the region, Kazakhstan’s leadership has consistently expressed a desire to take an active part in international organizations. This includes not only the CIS, CSTO, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) but also the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), OSCE, OIC, and even NATO’s Partnership for Peace Program. Unlike the other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has also pushed to be a leading actor in these organizations, twice holding the Chairmanship in Office of the OSCE and OIC in successive years (2010 and 2011, respectively). Even if symbolic, these positions indicate a desire by Kazakhstan to be a visible global actor, not just a force in Central Asia. Indeed, Kazakhstan’s hosting of two rounds of the P5+1 (UN Permanent Five Plus One – the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) negotiations on Iranian nuclear capabilities has been shown as proof of this capacity.
Uzbekistan

Of the five states in Central Asia, Uzbekistan has the reputation of being the country most willing to change decisions and readjust alliances and partnerships, depending upon the government’s interpretation of current security interests. Like the other states, Uzbekistan opened its doors to outside powers early on, although levels of investment and foreign assistance were less than in neighboring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Promoting a view that the country needs to be autarkic – self-sufficient – in strategic materials, energy, and food supply, President Islam Karimov ensured that supporting the domestic economic and energy needs was paramount before conducting major export deals, with the exception of the cotton industry and some strategic minerals.

Whereas Kazakhstan is an example of a multi-vectored security policy, Uzbekistan presents itself as an independent actor that picks and chooses foreign policy ties, focusing on bilateral engagement and always staying within limits. Representative of the ability to change decisions has been the status of Uzbekistan in such organizations as the CSTO and Georgia Ukraine Azerbaijan Moldova (GUAM), among other Eurasian structures, and as a “strategic partner” with the United States. While a signatory of the original Collective Security Treaty, which was formalized in a summit held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan was only a member of it from 1994 to 1999, when it withdrew over disputes with Russia. It did not participate in the follow-on Collective Security Treaty Organization, which was created in 2000, although a change in relations with Russia prompted President Karimov to sign as a full member in 2006. This arrangement lasted until 2012, when it once again withdrew, citing concerns of having foreign troops stationed on Uzbek soil as a problem. At present, it is not a member of the CSTO, although it has positive foreign and security relations with some of the member states (Contessi 2015). Perhaps most critically, its security ties with Russia remain limited, periodically chiding this northern neighbor for acting too assertively in the region.

As proof of this distanced relationship with Russia, Uzbekistan joined the loose security coalition known as GUAM (also known as the “Organization for Democracy and Economic Development,” which includes Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) in 1999, which has often been cast as an effort to separate from Russian domination in Eurasia. That said, it was quickly evident that Uzbekistan’s level of participation in the organization remained modest, with the country eventually withdrawing in 2005.

Finally, and linked to the on-again/off-again relationship with the CSTO, Uzbekistan signed a “treaty of friendship and cooperation” with the United States in 2001, as that country was beginning its campaign in Afghanistan. However, differences between the two, not the least of which was an insistence that the United States pay for the use of the military base at Karshi-Khanabad and the political fall-out from the violence in Andijon in May 2005, the two partners became estranged, and the United States was forced to exit the base facility in November of that year. US-Uzbek relations have remained uneven since that time, with the refrain of “security versus human rights” being heard in Washington, DC and other Western capitals. Current relations are more transactional, if anything, with a security focus on transnational threats and an economic focus on developing a limited range of industries in Uzbekistan to meet the increasing labor demands of the country.

Each of these experiences represents the foreign and security policy of Uzbekistan and a lack of willingness to become too dependent upon another country/set of countries to carry out its own policies. With the death of President Karimov on September 2, 2016, the country found itself in its first leadership succession situation since independence. The Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, took over as Acting President and was duly elected when
elections were held on December 4, 2016. Within his first months in office, speculation arose that he would improve ties with the immediate neighbors and focus on intra-Central Asian relations. Indeed, President Mirziyoyev has addressed Uzbek-Tajik and Uzbek-Kyrgyz issues, previously seen as problematic under his predecessor (Mirziyoyev 2016). At present, it appears that the focus of the new president will remain on improving the domestic economic conditions of the country; thus, foreign relations will most likely be of secondary importance, unless it has a direct and positive effect on the former.

Kyrgyzstan

Compared to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan has had a much more difficult time establishing a consistent foreign and security policy since independence, simply because of the lack of expertise and capacity to engage with foreign countries. After an initial attempt at declaring neutrality, the administration of President Askar Akayev (1990–2005) turned the country’s attention to the West, accepting significant amounts of aid and the conditions that came with it. Seeking to be the “Switzerland of Central Asia,” Kyrgyzstan of the 1990s stressed openness and transparency. To a limited extent, it was also able to craft a modest “multi-vectorized” foreign policy, opting to be part of a range of organizations. Thus, the country remained part of the CIS and Collective Security Treaty, and was an initial signatory state to the Shanghai Forum/Five.

As with the other states in the region, domestic politics dominated affairs mattered more, with foreign affairs focusing on ensuring economic stability and increasing foreign aid. What spelled trouble for Kyrgyzstan was the fact that the political leadership itself paid lip service to Western values and conditions and ultimately maintained the corrupt, nepotistic system that characterized the Soviet period. The result was the overthrow of two presidents (Akayev in 2005 and Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010) and a lurching back to a stronger relationship with Russia. Controversy over profits from fuel sales to the US base in the country only increased the tension between the two countries, which was exacerbated by a strong Russian media campaign against the United States (Mystery at Manas 2010). In 2014, President Almazbek Atambayev requested that the United States close its base facility at Manas International Airport (named Ganci Airbase for a short time until it was called the Manas Transit Center), which had been supporting NATO efforts in Afghanistan since December 2001.

With that closure, and an increase in support from Russia in both financial support (over $1 billion in in-kind, trade credits, and financing) and military personnel, it seems that the country is opting to remain within Russia’s Eurasian orbit. There is a clear logic to this: Several hundred thousand Kyrgyz are migrant workers in Russia, sending home enough money in remittances that peaked at approximately 32% of the Kyrgyz GDP in 2014. Losing this resource would be devastating for the Kyrgyz economy, and potentially the government’s legitimacy. Bolstering this relationship is the fact that Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU in 2015, linking its trade policies to others in that Russian-dominated structure.

In the end, Kyrgyzstan foreign policy has been more reactive and accommodating, based upon the domestic needs of the country. It has strong ties with most neighbors, and even is attempting to improve relations with post-Karimov Uzbekistan. President Atambayev believes that he must continue to develop stronger ties with those states in the region and nearby. In terms of the West, the relationship is getting more distant and problematic simply because the interests of those states in Kyrgyzstan are limited.
Tajikistan

Almost from the beginning, Tajikistan faced severe challenges in being able to function as state, let alone one that could construct a viable foreign and security policy. Tensions among competing factions within the country festered and then exploded into the previously mentioned civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1996, with a peace accord signed in 1997. It took several more years before President Emomali Rakhmon was able to consolidate his power and extend authority throughout the entire country. Thus, it is no surprise that a high priority for the country – leadership and citizenry – is stability and security. Therefore, in addition to rather draconian measures periodically taken within the country against opposition groups, especially Islamist ones, the Rakhmon government tends to rely on defined security arrangements within Eurasia – the CIS, CSTO, SCO, and the EEU.

A major foreign policy concern comes from Central Asia itself: Uzbekistan. Long-held differences with this larger neighbor to the West existed during the Soviet period, partly because both peoples lay historic claims to the cities of Samarqand and Bukhara. In the past two decades, tensions also have arisen over the Tajik government’s insistence that it build a massive 335-meter dam at Rogun, which would ostensibly help create energy for Tajikistan itself, and be a key element of an energy export network within South and Central Asia, the so-called “CASA-1000” project. Once completed, it would alter the flow rate of water from the Amy Darya, an essential water source for Uzbek agriculture – hence the war of words between officials from both sides. Deemed economically and environmentally viable by the World Bank, Tajikistan now spends considerable effort enlisting foreign companies and international financial institutions to assist in the completion of the project, which will extend to the next decade (World Bank 2014).

As the government considers threats from unstable Afghanistan to be a high priority, foreign policy directives tend to address this challenge as well. Consequently, Tajikistan allows a Russian military unit (the 201st Mechanized Division) to be based within the country and is once again agreeable to having Russia help protect the Tajik-Afghan border. Likewise, security assistance from China, India, and even Western powers focuses on border protection and counter-narcotics/counterterrorism tactics and support. With these immediate challenges, the parameters within which Tajikistan can proactively develop a foreign policy are limited. Protecting the territorial integrity of the county and staying any threats from abroad are paramount. The unknown factor in this is the impact of the remittance economy based on the nearly one million Tajik citizens that have spent time abroad, mainly in Russia. For much of the past twenty-five years, such workers found opportunities to earn money abroad and send it home, becoming an integral to Tajikistan’s economy. With the downturn in Russia’s economy starting in 2014, a reverse migration has taken place, with hundreds of thousands of Tajiks returning home – without job prospects – and causing some to believe that this could be a ripe recruiting environment for radical extremist groups (Lemon 2015). Handling the issue of “returning foreign fighters,” in the most extreme case, is now a priority in Tajikistan’s foreign policy agenda, once again highlighting the threat-based security assessment by the government.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan declared that it was going to be a neutral state, officially announcing its policy of “positive neutrality” to the United Nations on December 1995. This was the lasting legacy of the first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who believed that having his country...
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Tied within security and political alliances would threaten the independence of the country. The second president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who succeeded Niyazov in 2006, continues to adhere to the policy of positive neutrality. First and foremost, the policy means that Turkmenistan is not party to any collective defense organization or structure that would entail Turkmenistan to be part of a military alliance with other countries and have the possibility of foreign troops stationed on Turkmen soil. Likewise, it also limits Turkmenistan’s participation in international organizations that impose conditions on members or potentially restricts economic and political decisions. Thus, it is not part of the CSTO or SCO, and minimally engages with other regional organizations like the CIS and ECO. Positive neutrality does not mean, however, that Turkmenistan is an isolationist country, or “hermit kingdom,” as some critics suggest. It has trade agreements and bilateral ties with a host of neighboring and distant countries, as well as the immediate neighbors of Iran and Afghanistan. It is also a member of the United Nations, OSCE, and other international organizations. A long-serving minister, Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, as the guardian of this policy and since 2001, regularly meets with his counterparts and does carry out a foreign policy to promote Turkmen interests (Nichol 2013).

Key aspects of Turkmen foreign policy, therefore, focus on building bilateral ties, especially if they involve economic investment (Turkey) or energy exports (China). Indeed, with the latter, long-term gas export contracts form the core of Turkmenistan-China relations, involving sums of over 40 billion dollars. They also guarantee a ready market for Turkmen gas and became the primary consumer of Turkmen gas in the current decade. Another major project, the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline is underway, with construction taking place within Turkmenistan. Repeated meetings have been held to iron out the differences among the current partners and to entice further investment in the project. If completed, it will allow Turkmenistan to ship 33 bcm of gas to South Asian consumers. While there are other commercial goods traded between Turkmenistan and other markets – Russia, China, and Iran – the primary focus will remain on energy for the near future.

To a lesser extent, security is an issue of foreign policy concern. While neutral, Turkmenistan does maintain a military and border security forces, largely focused on combatting transnational threats. Since the early 2010s, incursions of fighters from Afghanistan, as well as the perennial problem of regional drug trafficking, have resulted in the Turkmen government more closely cooperating with international organizations (like the UNODC) and foreign security forces (NATO’s Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan). At times, though, contact can be abruptly limited, largely to ensure that the neutral status of the country remains intact. Such decisions can come across as mercurial to outside powers, and are often the source of frustration by countries and companies trying to do business in Turkmenistan. While it’s clear that Turkmenistan cannot be completely in control of its foreign policy agenda, as evidenced by the gas deals with China, the leadership intends to do as much on its own as possible. As with Uzbekistan, complete “agency” in foreign policy decision-making, or at least the perception of it, is an aspirational goal.

In each of the five countries, several things stand out. First of all, foreign policy remains under the control of the chief executive. The presidents are the decision-makers, and interchanging the name of the country with the president when describing foreign policy decisions is commonplace (Kurtov 2007). Even Kyrgyzstan, which has the most robust legislature, has a foreign policy largely run through the executive branch.

Second, the foreign policy priorities remain parochial. What happens in the immediate neighborhood is of utmost importance. Common threats, such as transnational terrorism
or narcotics trafficking, are regionally derived, and the dynamics dictate that the countries focus their foreign policy efforts to address these. The exception here might be Kazakhstan, which sees itself as a stronger actor on the global stage. This is evidenced not just by the opportunities to be Chairman in Office of the OSCE and OIC in successive years but also for holding “Expo 2017 – Astana.”

Third, the states have limited capacity to carry out broad-based foreign policies; therefore, they have to be selective in priorities. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan focus largely on engaging with those states investing in the country, and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan only slightly increase their visibility overseas. The number of embassies abroad is limited, and they exist in countries that would make sense to the region. No surprise, these states include other Eurasian countries, the major European and North American states, and selective countries in Asia. Indeed, if one sees an area of increased attention is that of South and East Asia. Economic agreements and high-level visits have been high over the recent decade with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, in addition to the expected cases of China and India.

Fourth, the region generally adheres to the belief that outside powers are keenly interested in their resources, land, and markets, ultimately wanting to control the region. Referring to “great game” politics in Central Asia is commonplace, even if the current situation is not quite as adventurous as that of the 19th century. It would be a mistake to conclude that the Central Asian countries are merely pawns on a geopolitical chessboard and unable to assert their interests. A key difference is that the Central Asian countries, to varying degrees, try to assert their own views more explicitly. Like other small and medium countries, they have to be selective in approach, priorities, and actions for which they will expend valuable resources and personnel. The “great game” narrative remains alive and well for the very fact that external actors continue to announce policies toward Central Asia. The extent to which these are truly important efforts, though, is what we will examine next.

Outside powers competing for the region?

As this chapter focuses on the foreign policies of the Central Asian states themselves, only limited space can be devoted to addressing the interests of the outside countries engaged in the region. Given the geographic reality of Central Asia, it’s no surprise that only a few countries have sustained engagement with the region, and mainly for specific reasons. Earlier observations emphasizing raw materials and security continue to shape how foreign countries see the region, which is more often than not looked upon as a single whole.

Russia

Put simply, Russia views the Central Asian states as part of its “near abroad,” and therefore a zone of special engagement. While the capacity to actually be a dominant actor in the region was severely curtailed in the 1990s, due to economic weakness and political instability, Russia has proven itself to be a more forceful entity since the first term of President Vladimir Putin. According to Russia’s current National Security Strategy and repeated pronouncements of its leadership, Central Asia holds a security, economic, and even “civilizational” importance to Moscow (Lukyanov 2016).

In terms of security, Russia remains involved in both bilateral and multilateral security relationships with all five countries, although ties with neutral Turkmenistan are admittedly the weakest. Russian forces are stationed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and even though Russian deployments in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan withdrew, a “Russian
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presence” remained paramount for the region’s security. At least in the first decade, Western powers were supportive of this arrangement. For example, as the civil war raged in Tajikistan, a Russian-led peacekeeping force was deployed in that country. The Americans and Europeans limited their involvement to the OSCE and United Nations observers that were in the country from 1992 onward. Even as the United States and NATO forces deployed in the region after October 2001, it was clear that they were focused exclusively on the campaign in Afghanistan, paying less attention to the security challenges within Central Asia. With their departure in the summer of 2014, it now is the case that Russia is the only outside power with a permanent military presence in Central Asia. More importantly, Russia maintains ties with three of the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) via the CSTO. This collective defense structure allows not just the presence of Russian troops in the region but opportunities for joint training exercises, educational exchanges, and other opportunities to integrate the regional armed forces (Jackson 2014; Kim 2015).

In terms of economic relations, the absolute numbers of Russian–Central Asian trade remain high, although they have been surpassed by Chinese engagement. Consumer goods, military hardware, and even technical support are still key elements of Russia’s trade with the region, which has a turnover of between 30 and 45 billion dollars a year (Sinitsina 2012). Likewise, raw materials from Central Asia find a ready market in Russia. With the advent of the EEU, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are even further tied to Russia. Customs barriers and legal regimes are to be systemized, making the EEU akin to the EU (at least in the European Economic Community era).

Lastly, Russia perceives the states of Central Asia to be junior partners within the broader Eurasian “civilizational” environment. Over the past decade, more has been written on the importance of the “Eurasian” concept, stressing that the Central Asian countries, like Russia, are not part of the Western civilization (Mileski 2015; Lukyanov 2016). Western values and norms are not applicable in this region that needs to find its own voice and expression. Increasingly, President Putin stresses this “special relationship” when meeting with his Central Asian counterparts. Such a strategy is partially successful. Given the economic and security ties that exist, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are comfortably connected with Russia. Kazakhstan, while a more assertive and economically endowed actor, still manages to foster a positive relationship with Russia. Even Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which are more distant, usually opt not to be critical of their neighbor to the north.

The United States and the European Union

American interests in Central Asia have been fairly consistent over the years, although the resources to actually address such concerns have been limited. Since 1991, and especially since the first complete declaration of policy interests in the region in 1996, the United States has focused on several key issues. It has advocated political reform and democratization, economic reform and marketization, energy security through the diversification of export routes, and regional security, usually via multilateral organizations (Talbott 1997; Nichol 2014). In the late 1990s, the United States began devoting more resources to assist some of the Central Asian states to combat transnational terrorist groups, particularly the Al-Qaeda-funded Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). More definitively, after the September 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., the United States sought and received support from the Central Asian states to conduct its military campaign in Afghanistan, as previously noted. OEF, as well as the later missions focusing on stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan (the ISAF and Resolute Support Missions), bases in Central
Asia and the northern distribution network (NDN) played key roles. That said, the base at Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan, was open for only four years (2001–2005), and the base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, was open for thirteen (2001–2014), which means that today, there are no US troops permanently stationed in Central Asia.

The impact of this departure can be seen in a drop in funding numbers, as well, as how the region is viewed within the broader US national security and foreign policy priorities. Over two decades of National Security Strategies show that Central Asia is mentioned only a handful of times – either with respect to energy security or to the campaign in Afghanistan. As economic relations between the United States and the region remain modest, and now security ties are also minimal, it is logical to conclude that Central Asia is simply not high on the American agenda.

The EU shares some of the basic interests and challenges in Central Asia as that of the United States. In the beginning of the 2000s, the EU developed and published a “White Paper” that outlined the organization’s strategy for dealing with Central Asia (Emerson 2010). As with other Eurasian states, a fundamental feature was the adherence to certain standards and values that are deemed critical from European perspective. Unfortunately, over time, European organizations conclude that the Central Asian countries are becoming less transparent in terms of human and political rights (European Parliament 2016).

Perhaps more important than these concerns is the fact that both the United States and the EU countries face a myriad of challenges within their immediate neighborhoods, and as issues are prioritized, Central Asia is of lesser importance. As a result, one sees a greater emphasis on regional and international organizations in the region, to include an acceptance of a greater involvement of the SCO and CSTO in foreign policy and security matters. This is quite a change from the 1990s, when the West believed the Central Asian countries, along with the rest of the former Soviet states, desired to be part of a broader trans-European political, economic, and security architecture.

**China**

The past decade has seen the emergence of China as a significant economic partner to the five Central Asian states. All have increased bilateral ties with this eastern neighbor so that China is now the top (or among the top) country in a number of economic categories. Initially starting with commercial trade, particularly shuttle trade across the border to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, bilateral economic ties have evolved into a complex web of commercial, logistical, energy, and transportation connections that have been advantageous to all parties involved. As previously noted with respect to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, energy transfers to China make us a substantial part of bilateral trade. For China, which is the largest energy consumer in Asia, acquiring rights to long-term energy deals is essential for sustained economic growth (Chen 2012).

Trade has become more than just raw material or commercial goods deals. Since 2014, China has drawn the Central Asian countries into the broader policy of “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) that encompasses a plethora of neighbors and investors throughout South and Central Asia, extending all the way to Europe. The overland component, often called the “Silk Road” strategy, uses the Central Asian states as transit points for East-West commercial trade (Fallon 2015). In theory, this will affect Kazakhstan the most, although Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have a role to play, as well. The trade routes southward – through Tajikistan and Afghanistan – parallel the CPEC routes via Pakistan and will more likely service a regional market. While this has been positively portrayed in the Central
Asian media, there are some questions regarding the ultimate benefits to the region itself. Will Central Asia be a mere transit region, with larger profits going to China and Europe? Will the second- and third-order benefits of increased labor opportunities, connectivity, and travel to outside markets, as well as consumer zones to service the transit hubs of OBOR, materialize?

In terms of political and security interests, the situation is less dynamic. To date, the Chinese government has been clear in its advocacy of “non-interference in the domestic affairs of others” and has refrained from engaging in any meaningful way in the internal affairs of the Central Asian states. When violence has occurred, or when human rights violations are highlighted, Chinese officials vocally support the regimes in power. Likewise, when there is a leadership transition, either through violence (Kyrgyzstan 2005 and 2010) or the death of an incumbent (Turkmenistan 2006 and Uzbekistan 2016), Beijing offers its support to the new leaders. This has become a not-so-subtle way of contrasting Chinese views with those of Western powers, who constantly question the domestic politics of the region. The major Chinese-based security organization, the SCO, is likewise silent on issues of “values and norms,” instead focusing on confidence building measures, cooperation, and combating transnational threats (the three evils of separatism, extremism, and terrorism) (Kassenova 2009; Dadabaev 2014). From a Central Asian point of view, this approach resonates, and in recent years, it has become commonplace to consider China an essential neighbor and partner. Postings to Beijing now rival those to Moscow and Washington, DC as career-enhancing opportunities for Central Asian diplomats.

Several observations can be drawn from these modest examples. First of all, the Central Asian states themselves are not of primary importance to any of the major powers listed. The same could be said for regional countries, such as Turkey, Iran, and India. While there is a broad web of bilateral and multilateral agreements in place, the five countries in the region do not warrant a high level of attention. Even Russia, which sees Central Asia as a special zone of interest, considers its own Western border, with Ukraine and the EU, further beyond, more critical. The same can be said for Russia’s border with China and the Far East.

Second, when outside countries are engaged in Central Asia, it is more often than not for specific reasons. As noted several times, this usually means energy and/or security. As a result, there is an unfortunate habit of treating the countries instrumentally, in an effort to address another problem.

Third, this engagement is episodic. When crises emerge, attention is directed to the region. Absent such tensions, the very same attention abates. Usually, this criticism is levied against Western countries, particularly the United States. However, it applies to other outside powers, as well. India, for example, is developing a more robust security cooperation relationship with Tajikistan. When discussion of opening an air base at Ayni occurred, both Russia and Pakistan raised concerns that this was an attempt to “militarize” the region even more by strengthening India’s presence (vis-à-vis Pakistan). While this may not have been India’s intention, it was definitely perceived to be that way by other regional actors.

Finally, it is the challenge of perception that continually plagues the region. As it is a remote area for many countries, active engagement is viewed through the lens of some “greater game” that is being played. This has had a limiting effect on how the Central Asian countries engage with outside powers, and also exaggerates the supposed tensions in the region. Ironically, for over ten years, Kyrgyzstan was host to both US/NATO and Russian/CSTO air bases, seemingly able to manage each. During this time, no serious problems arose between the two bases, even though rhetorical difference expressed by political leaders would suggest otherwise.
Conclusion

In sum, the foreign policy of Central Asia is one of managing limitations. The five states therein are increasingly developing their own foreign and security identities and are not simply repeating the actions of the others. It would seem that after more than a quarter century of independence, each state has been able to assess their own policy priorities. For all, state sovereignty is paramount, with three – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan – able to actively develop foreign policy strategies to maintain it. The other two – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – are less capable, mainly because of limited resources but also because of geography. They are wedged among major regional players that have a dominant role in their economies and security.

The future trends and challenges for the Central Asian states fall into four major categories. These reflect the basic interests and concerns of outside powers as well as the factors that could help the five states project power.

Energy

There is no question that energy will remain a key foreign policy topic for at least Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, with respect to oil and gas. Assuming that the CASA-1000 project gets underway in a realistic manner, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan could find themselves engaged in hydropower discussions with neighboring states and international funders. The challenge that all face is the extent to which these resources are desired by outside consumers and the level of perseverance they have in working through the sometimes difficult business environment. In the area of gas, for example, Turkmenistan has developed a sustainable relationship with China. However, routing in other directions remains hostage to other, outside factors, as well as the “ease of doing business.” In the coming years, the Turkmen government ought to have concerns of possessing “stranded reserves.”

Trade

The “Silk Road” narratives are great for initial policies and public statements, but making them realities remains a paramount concern. Legal regimes, infrastructure, and cooperative neighbors all must be developed. Moreover, the comparative advantage of trade from and through Central Asia needs to be realized. Unless external consumers find a reason for wanting trade through Central Asia, the often-discussed plans will remain on paper only, and the region could be bypassed for more profitable routes.

Politics and human rights

One of the biggest challenges the United States and other Western powers have had with the five Central Asian states is about how to address the question of human rights. A reading of human rights reporting from the US Department of State, which is the baseline for American engagement with the region, shows a downward trend overall in Central Asia. Organizations such as Freedom House and Human Rights Watch also note the potential for conditions worsening. While this is a problem for the West, it is not so for other outside actors. Both Russia and China have expressed their support for not interfering in the domestic affairs of other states and the so-called Beijing Consensus is gaining traction in Central Asia – as an alternative to the conditions-based discourse of the West (Safranchuk 2016).
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Security

Perhaps the most complex dynamic in the region remains that of security, which is inexertably linked to the other three factors. At present, Central Asia does not face direct threats from neighbors, nor have any of the five gone to war with each other, in spite of periodic bouts of hostile rhetoric. Could this change? Most likely, the chance of state-on-state conflict will remain low, which is a result of the interlocking security architecture that exists in the region, and beyond. While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan belong to multiple structures, Turkmenistan remains limited in its engagement. That said, all seem to abide by the “rules of the game” that organizations like the CSTO and SCO have to offer. Through these structures, tensions between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over water usage and between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over the conditions in the Ferghana Valley can be addressed.

Security challenges from outside of the region remain. This is especially the case from across the southern border. Afghanistan’s stability is tenuous, and transnational extremist groups continue to travel through and conduct acts of violence within that state. Were such organizations as the IMU, Da’esh, or others to seek to expand northward into Central Asia, they would find potential opportunities. In the past, terrorist acts took place in Central Asia, so this would not be a new phenomenon. The likelihood that a particular group would gather enough strength to become an existential threat to a country in the region seems remote at present. However, could they destabilize certain subregions (Badakhshan and the Fergana Valley, for example)? That is a concern for the countries, more so because there is a lack of cooperation in the region other than through the multinational organizations, which have not been truly tested as credible counterterrorism forces.

Each of these elements is common to other parts of the world and not necessarily unique to Central Asia. How the five states actually address them (independent of each other most likely) will determine much of how they identify themselves in the coming years. Moreover, the extent to which outside powers are willing to offer support is also unknown. Will it require an actual crisis to draw attention from abroad?

Finally, in the coming decades, will the Central Asian states increasingly identify with Asia, as opposed to the narrower sense of Eurasia? It has only been in the current decade that China surpassed Russia as the top trading partner, and the familiarity of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, and Malaysian continues to increase. Moreover, Asian-centered organizations, whether it is the SCO or the AIIB or even the “One Belt One Road” project, have much greater attention in the region. As these mature, will Central Asia truly become part of Asia?

Bibliography


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